

RAISING THE ROOF LEARNING TEAM REPORT

Adopted by the Session on March 27th, 2006

In July of 2004 our Session selected a team to lead our congregation through a season of learning and discernment and to explore together with you our congregation's past, present and future. We were charged to study and to share our learnings about church size transitions, with a specific focus on how the pastoral-to-program size transition affects our life as a congregation. We have used as our guide *Raising the Roof* written by Alban Institute senior consultant Alice Mann.

It has been both an honor and a challenge to serve our church in this way, and this document is a result of over 18 months of study, learning and prayer. In the first section titled **Our Historic Identity** and **Vocation**, we highlight several elements from our past that illumine our present and our future. In the section titled **Our Current Calling**, we explore some of the changes occurring in our surrounding community and how we feel God is calling us in the midst of this context. We also discuss two Biblical stories that we have found to guide us at this moment in our story of faith. Finally, in **Next Steps**, we outline specific actions we feel could help our congregation to move forward. We also assess our readiness as a congregation to make room so that others may join us in experiencing the power of God in this amazing place.

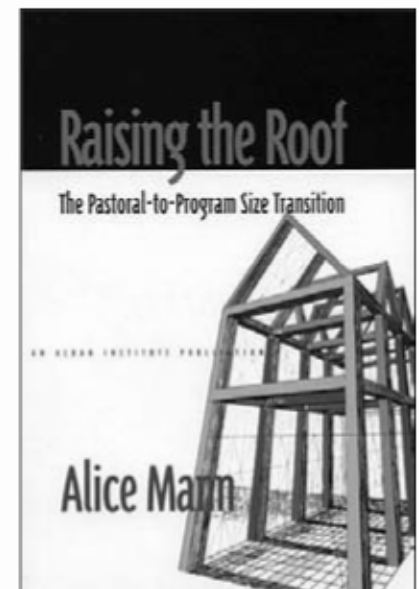
This is an exciting time in the life of our church and our city, and we sense that God is calling us to grow as a church—in numbers, in faith, in mission and in witness to Jesus Christ. As a learning team

we hope that our work may help our congregation to identify, respond to and celebrate God's call on all of our lives. Thank you for entrusting us with this task and for taking the time to consider these reflections and recommendations prayerfully.

Our Historic Identity and Vocation

Since 1872 First Presbyterian Church has been a Home in the Heart of the City of Birmingham, Alabama. This church was founded with the founding of this city, and this corner has been our congregation's home for over 130 years. While the early members of the church were few, it was not long before they felt led to step out in faith and build a new church for a new city. In 1888 our current sanctuary was built to replace the Old School Presbyterian Church building that had been moved from Elyton to our present location. Though it has been remodeled at different times in our history, we continue to worship in the same space today.

In the latter 1800s and early decades of the 1900s, First Presbyterian Church experienced growth along with the city. Following the Great Depression hard times hit us all. In 1938 our congregation was encouraged to leave downtown and to merge with a sister church in another part of the city. This was the first and



This is an exciting time in the life of our church and our city, and we sense that God is calling us to grow as a church

would not be the last time we were invited to abandon our present location. Yet members of this congregation faithfully heard the call to continue to share and give witness to Christ's presence in the Heart of the City. So we stayed.

Once again, along with our city, First Presbyterian Church experienced significant growth in the 1950s. It was in that time that our sanctuary's stained glass windows were placed telling the story of Christ's life and of God's long-time covenant with God's people in the heart of the city. Yet a pivotal moment in the life of our congregation was on the horizon. In 1963, we found ourselves in the heart of the Civil Rights Movement, and this time of conflict would not leave our church untouched.

Our long-time pastor Dr. Edward Ramage was one of the clergy addressed by Dr. Martin Luther King in his now famous Letter from Birmingham City Jail. Though it was controversial and not supported by many members of our congregation, Dr. Ramage took a stand declaring that we would be a church open to all of God's people. Although the tension surrounding this stand would eventually cause him to leave his job, this vision was ultimately affirmed by our Session. The prophetic nature of this call continues to shape our mission and ministry today.

In the decades that followed, First Presbyterian Church would again go through hard times along with our city. As downtown declined, our membership declined, and once again, the invitation was extended to leave our Home in the Heart of the City. However a faithful remnant resisted as they continued to hear a call to share Christ's presence in and through this place. So we stayed.

Now here we are, on the very same corner of downtown Birmingham, where this church began when this city began. Since 1872 we have been an integral part of the life of this city. While that has meant different things at different times, the people of this place for generations have been willing to live out their faith in some exciting and daring ways. In the early days this was evidenced through the building up of this church and through the planting of many other Presbyterian churches in this city. In more recent years, our congregation's faithfulness has been demonstrated through the building up of ministries like the Rushton Child Development Center, the First Light Shelter for Women and Children, the STAIR Tutoring Program and the Ruth and Naomi Senior Outreach. We have also completed an extensive renovation of our historic building, and we trust that God is preparing and shaping us for years of ministry to come.

Our Current Calling

As our Raising the Roof Learning Team has worked hard to learn more about our church's history, we've also focused our study on the changing reality of downtown Birmingham. Our city, like our church, is experiencing a time of renewal and redevelopment. The influx of residents into communities like Park Place and the growing loft district has only begun. Over the next several years, hundreds if not thousands of additional residents are projected to move downtown.

The Hope VI project has brought both economic and racial diversity to our com-

munity. There are now many families with young children living in this neighborhood. The Loft District is attracting many young professionals, often without children, and empty nesters into the downtown community. It is our understanding that a growing number of city center residents do not have a church home. We are also seeing the development of new restaurants along with the

renovation of many historic buildings destined to both commercial and residential use.

We are increasingly aware of the 30,000 plus people who come daily to work downtown, and that number grows to over 80,000 if you include UAB and the Southside area. Homelessness and the lack of affordable

housing continue to be a problem, and the future of the urban poor remains to be an issue that needs to be addressed creatively and with sufficient resources.

As we look at the complexity of the changing nature of our community, we reaffirm our commitment to being an integral part of downtown Birmingham. Our membership currently spans much of the metro area and beyond, and we are aware that we do not need to lose focus of the diverse geographic nature of our congregation. Yet as the downtown community grows, we believe our outreach of both invitation and service to the new residents of downtown should grow accordingly. Our commitment to urban justice is one of our congregation's strengths, and this call to service needs to be fostered. We also have an historic commitment to inviting others to share with us in the Presbyterian experience of the

As we look at the complexity of the changing nature of our community, we reaffirm our commitment to being an integral part of downtown Birmingham.

faith, and this call to invitation needs to be rekindled and celebrated.

As we review all of these findings, our Raising the Roof Learning Team has found inspiration in two specific passages from Scripture. Hebrews 12 looks back and reminds us that *“we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.”* Many of these witnesses have been revealed to us as we have explored the past and the present of our congregation. We are also aware of the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us as we embrace the Biblical story of our forefathers and mothers in the faith. At this time we especially find inspiration in the story of the Call of Abram in Genesis 12.

God called Abram to leave that which he knew—his country, his kindred and his father’s house—to go to a place that God had not yet revealed to him. The Lord’s promise was that God would bless him and make his people great so that he would be a blessing to others. We too are being called to leave that which we know, that which is comfortable, to go out into a land yet unrevealed to us. While we do not understand this calling to include a change of geography, we do believe God is calling us to change and grow in our journey of faith and in our life together as a congregation. God’s promise to our church is the same as God’s promise to Abram—*I will bless you and make your people great so that you will be a blessing to others.* Scripture tells us *“So Abram went.”* What will we do?

Next Steps

Many challenges arise at this critical time in the life of a congregation. At the pastoral-to-program size transition, it has been said that a congregation feels stretched. Many of us know this feeling. In order to successfully navigate this

transition, a new kind of teamwork must emerge from within the congregation, while the pastors’ roles shift to the crucial tasks of recruiting, equipping and inspiring an integrated circle of key leaders. Though the needs are many, our learning team has worked hard to identify a short list of strategic barriers we feel, that if addressed, could help to move our congregation forward. In order to strengthen our partnership in ministry and to reach and retain the next 50 to 100 people God wants to send to our church, we recommend the following items for action:

- **Improve the signage and access to church facilities.** We have a wonderful building with access to ample parking. However we have discovered that our church is often difficult for newcomers to navigate. Additional signage both inside and outside of the building would help individuals to find their way into and around our church. This would help make people feel more welcome. Access to our building during the week and for special events also needs to be evaluated, taking into account the need to balance both safety and accessibility. We recommend that the Session assign a person or persons to oversee this work, and we believe this issue should be addressed in the next three months. We make this recommendation understanding that some of this work has already begun.
- **Develop a system of follow-up for both members and visitors.** We pride ourselves on being a welcoming congregation, and that we are. In order to take full advantage of this strength, which God has given to us, we need to develop a system to assist in the integration of both members and visitors into the life of the congregation. We

need a team of people who will oversee the welcome and integration of visitors to the church as well as tracking the integration and participation of members in our worship, ministry and mission. This is important to ensure that people feel connected to the church, as well as attempting to avoid either the under-utilization or the over-utilization of the gifts of any one person. We recommend that a team with lay leadership be formed to coordinate and lead our new Explorer Series, the welcome and integration of visitors to the church and the follow up and support of the members of our congregation. The installation of a computer network and the appropriate church software will provide essential tools for carrying out this ministry. We recommend that such a team should be in place within the next three to six months, and the Session should oversee the formation and startup of this team.

- **Develop a comprehensive ministry plan.** Our church has been blessed with many active ministries. At this time we see the need to enhance and support our ministries through the development of a comprehensive ministry plan. This should involve a renewed structure for our ministry teams, along with clear roles and responsibilities for our Session and staff. We recommend that the Session with the support of our pastoral staff actively work to develop and communicate such a plan to the congregation. The development of this plan should be done in the next three to six months, while its initial implementation may take up to a year.
- **Develop a particular focus on programs for children and families.**

- **Develop a second weekly worship service with a different style and time.** The center of our life together is our worship of God, and First Presbyterian Church worships well. Our Reformed way of worship can accommodate a diversity of styles, and we recommend the formation of a second weekly service with a different style and time. The creation of such a service would open space for a whole other group of people who could join us in calling First Presbyterian Church their Home in the Heart of the City. There are many questions that need to be addressed in order to develop, implement and integrate another worship service into the life of our church. Therefore we recommend that the Session appoint a task force to begin studying this issue. This task force should report to the Session, and a second service should be implemented when both groups agree the time is right. We hope such a service could be established within the next 12 to 18 months, if not sooner.

Without a doubt we all know that this is a time of transition for our congregation, and transitions can be difficult. Nonetheless, we trust that God has given us the necessary gifts to make this journey together.

We realize that these actions do not address all of the needs of our congregation. We also realize that First Presbyterian Church will not be able to be all things to all people. However we feel that we are at a crossroads, and we need to choose between cutting back and settling into a smaller, pastoral size church or restructuring in order to expand into a program size congregation. This is not an easy choice to make, nor does simply making a choice assure us of any certain future. If the choice to grow is made, we believe that addressing these issues will help our congregation to move through the pastoral-to-program size transition.

Once again it has been an honor to serve our church in this capacity. We are encouraged by the strength of this church and its faithfulness to God. We are also confident of God's faithfulness to us. Without a doubt we all know that this is a time of transition for our congregation, and transitions can be difficult. Nonetheless, we trust that God has given us the necessary gifts to make this journey together. Although differences and disagreements will surely arise along the way, we see within this congregation the ability to navigate those differences trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As we finish our work as a learning team, we leave you with these final words from the 12th Chapter of Hebrews that have been an inspiration to us:

Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls! So don't sit around on your hands! No more dragging your feet! Clear the path for long-distance runners so no one will trip and fall, so no one will step in a hole and sprain an ankle. Help each other out. And run for it! Work at getting along with each other and with God. Otherwise you'll never get so much as a glimpse of God. Make sure no one gets left out of God's generosity.

(Hebrews 12:1-3, 12-15a – *The Message*)